

*When Christoph Stöckel and Guido Lichtensteiger visited a upland community in India in 2002 their lives, and those of the people they met, changed for ever.*

*“Together - Help for India” is a charitable project which commits 100 per cent of donations to its cause and understands how small changes can make a huge difference.*

Despite India’s burgeoning economy, the vast majority of its population is still living in extreme poverty. Shockingly, of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty worldwide, over 40 per cent of them live in the Indian subcontinent. In the upland federal state of Madhya Pradesh, this situation is worse than average and it is here that “Together - Help for India” concentrates its activities. Primarily in support of the Dattigaon Mission but also in improving facilities for the surrounding villages.

### **Men with a mission**

Much of the activity undertaken by “Together - Help for India” takes place around the Dattigaon Mission which is run by local man Father Edward. Although the Mission is a Christian one, it welcomes all religions and works primarily with local Adivasi people who are the original inhabitants of the area and mainly Hindus. Christoph Stöckel and Guido Lichtensteiger spend much of their time in India working in this area.

The Mission provides food, accommodation and schooling for around 400 children as well as medical support for people in the surrounding area. Father Edward is devoted to his task and the happiness he gives is reflected in the faces of the children as they gather around him.

Generous donations to the charity have enabled further improvements, particularly in terms of medical support, and a well-equipped hospital ward is now a permanent fixture at the mission. In the last year, two further wards have been opened in more remote villages. Many local people have little or no money for medical support so these wards provide an essential service in the community and the “Together - Help for India” charity subsidises all the costs.

### **Learning to change**

As well as good health and nutrition, education is proven to be an important factor in enabling a community to bring itself out of poverty. The Dattigaon Mission provides kindergarten class and the first three years of school to local children. With the help of “Together - Help for India” construction of a new school building has taken place at the Mission there are plans to provide schooling up to fifth year for the local children.

According to Christoph Stöckel education is already making a big difference in the area. “We know that education can play a huge part in freeing a society from poverty and we are seeing improvements all the time. Educated members of the community are able to understand the importance of hygiene, health care and environmental awareness and they can spread this knowledge to their friends and families. This how change comes about.”

The Mission is supporting a number of children through higher education to study a range of topics including mechanical engineering, law, medicine and teaching. All subjects which will improvements to the community in the long-run. This is something Father Edward would like to do more and he is working with “Together - Help for India” to create a sponsorship programme for individuals. It will support those who can benefit from higher education and those who might need specialist or ongoing medical care.

### **Water for life**

A reliable clean water supply seems such a basic right to us who are lucky enough to live in the developed world that it is difficult to imagine the hardship created by not having one. The people behind “Together- Help for India” were quick to realise the importance of building more wells in the local villages throughout the region and they have focussed a great deal of activity and resources into well construction.

Generally these wells are built by hand in the dry season with the help of local people. A hole of 12 metres deep is dug out and then a diesel pump is installed to allow the water to be used to irrigate the fields. The impact of this basic engineering is astonishing - villagers no longer have to travel for their own water, they can grow their own crops and are able pump water into lakes in the rainy season for use in the dry season.

### **Cooking in the sun**

One of the surprising effects of deforestation throughout India has been the affect on local people to prepare food. Traditional Indian meals are prepared on wood fires, but with this basic fuel now in short supply “Together - Help for India” and the Dattigaon Mission have been working together to find a solution.

The sun proved to be the answer and a solar-powered cooker was sourced and brought to the Mission. After villagers received a presentation and the chance to it try out, the Mission received orders for 40 of the cookers. Villagers were asked for a small contribution towards the cost and the Mission and the charity were delighted to make up the rest. A solar cooking station is also being installed at the mission to reduce the amount of wood required to cook the meals for the 400 children who live there.

### **Little things make a big difference**

For people living with nothing, sometimes the smallest differences can make a huge impact. Because “Together - Help for India” is a small enterprise which supports a specific area it can target funds straight to the people who need them. Christoph Stökel and Guido Lichtensteiger, alongside Father Edward of the Dattigan Mission, are extraordinary people who understand what makes India tick.

Improving education, sanitation and medical welfare are necessary and important and this is where most of the funding goes. But there are other ways to improve lives - simple things like a toy and book library for the children, packets of seeds for the poorest villagers, typewriters to help with keyboard skills and a big hug when things look desperate. “Together - Help for India” is a charity which has the time, imagination and compassion for these thing as well.